

# Executive Summary

## 2013 Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge Application

Connecticut has applied for a Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge Federal grant for **\$37.3 million** to improve the quality of early learning programs (both center and home-based) for young children in the state. The new Office of Early Childhood is the lead agency on this grant. The application proposes to increase access to high-quality early learning experiences for children from birth to age five who are from low-income families or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, including those who have disabilities or developmental delays, who are English language learners, or who are migrant, homeless, or in foster care, or who reside on Indian lands or rural areas. Currently, there are about 440 publicly funded programs at the highest level of quality serving about 22,000 young children in the target populations. At the end of the four-year grant period, the goal is to ensure that 31,500 children in existing target populations are enrolled in programs of the highest quality by ensuring they have access to 900 programs at the highest levels of quality. Ultimately, providing all children with access to high-quality programs is intended to close the opportunity gap at kindergarten entry in order to help our young children succeed in school and in life. The application proposes to accomplish this through three major strategies:

- Provide **supports and incentives for programs** to improve their quality
- Provide **information and incentives for families** to select higher quality programs
- Implement a system to **rate the quality** of programs

Program Supports and Financial Incentives will be available to help programs improve and maintain high quality. Grant funds will be used to create five Regional Quality Improvement Centers across the state to provide technical assistance and professional development to move up the quality levels. Substantial new financial incentives will be available to programs serving minimum numbers of children in the target populations. Existing financial incentives will be modified to target funds to improve and reward programs for their high quality and for serving children in the target populations.

Information and Financial Incentives for Families will help parents access and afford high-quality programs for their children. Grant funds will be used to launch a major public awareness campaign to help parents understand the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences and how to use the new quality rating system. The child care subsidy (Care4Kids) program will provide parents with incentives for selecting quality programs through a tiered rating system and a reduction of the parent co-pay at higher levels of quality.

The Quality Rating & Improvement System will rate center- and home-based early learning programs using tiered quality levels that are based on comprehensive program standards. The levels range from meeting basic health and safety determined by the state licensing system to meeting national standards for early childhood program excellence.

### What is Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge?

- A competitive federal grant to states to improve the quality of early learning programs for children before kindergarten, particularly children with high needs.
- A total of \$280 million is available in round 3 in 2013. Connecticut is eligible for a total of \$37.5 million over 4 years. 16 states & Washington, D.C. also applied in 2013, round 3.
- Awards will be announced in late December.

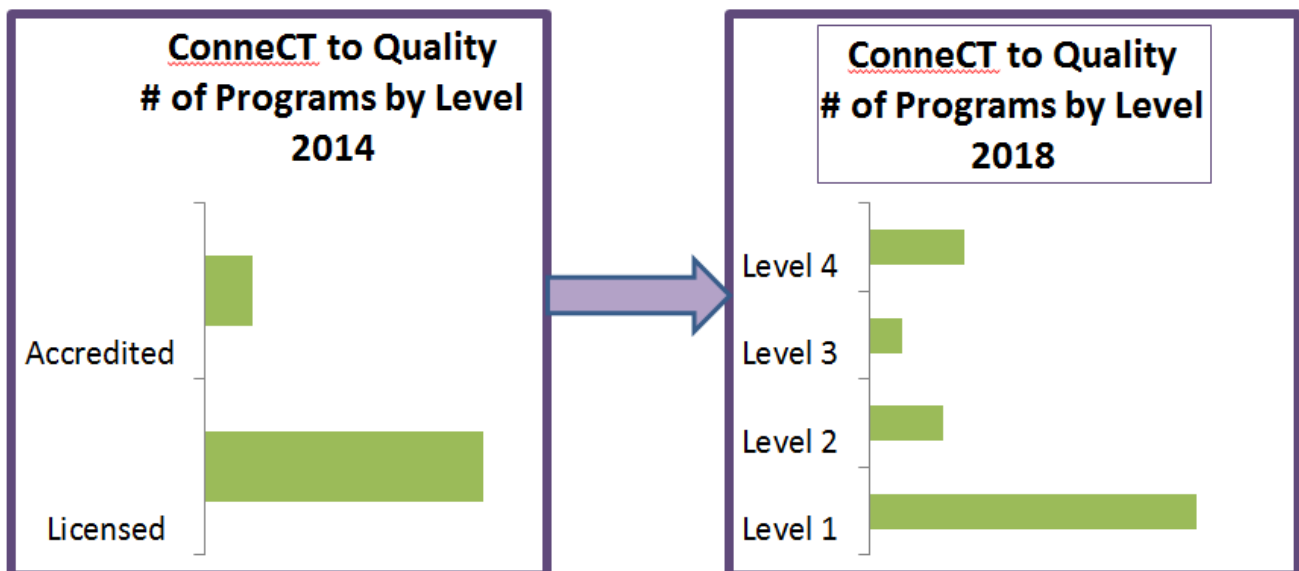
## ConneCT to Quality: A Quality Rating and Improvement System

The ConneCT to Quality System is a system of supports, incentives and ratings designed to provide families and communities with information about the quality of early learning programs. Programs receiving public funds (Head Start, School Readiness, and Child Day Care Centers) or those programs that serve 10% or more children receiving Care 4 Kids will be required to participate. All other programs will have the option to participate.

### Rating Scale

Program will be rated using a five level scale based on progressive standards and will be monitored by state and national organizations. As an initial launch of ConneCT to Quality System, a list of licensed (Level 1) and accredited programs (level 4) who are required to be in the Quality Rating System will be made available to the public in March 2014 while the full system is under development. By 2015, the remaining levels will be finalized and launched.

Quality Rating Scale	Broad Overview of Requirements	Status
Level 5	Accreditation plus workforce requirements	Under Consideration
Level 4	Accreditation by NAEYC, NAFCC, Head Start	Ready for Launch (A process for approval of other accreditation systems is under review.)
Level 3	External Assessment (i.e. CLASS and ERS)	In Development
Level 2	Self- Assessment and Plans for Improvement	In Development
Level 1	Licensed	Ready for Launch
Not rated	Unlicensed	



## Financial Incentives

Financial incentives will be available to both center- and home-based programs where at least 10% of children served receive Care 4 Kids subsidies<sup>1</sup> in order to ensure programs, families, and educators have funds available to increase the quality of programs serving children in target groups.

**Annual Quality Achievement Awards\*:** Annual grant based on the size of the program, the quality level it has attained, and the number of children served in the target populations. In other words, the higher the quality of the program and the more children in the target populations served, the greater the financial award (approximately \$2.5 million per year if CT is awarded the Race to the Top grant).

**Quality Improvement Grants:** State grants to help programs implement their quality improvement plans to achieve higher levels of quality (approximately \$300,000 per year if CT is awarded the grant).

**Minor Capital Improvement Grants:** State grants for minor capital improvements to achieve and maintain higher levels of quality (approximately \$27 million remains from bond funds).\*

**Care 4 Kids Reimbursements:** Care 4 Kids reimbursements will be increased for all providers (upon conclusion of union negotiations). In addition, the state will ensure that new funds are available so the increased cost of paying for children to access higher levels of quality does not reduce the total number of children served. \*

**Scholarships:** State scholarships will be available to help educators pay for professional development and higher education (from existing scholarship money).\*

**Start Bonuses:** Start Bonuses to reward educators serving children in the target populations who achieve higher levels of education (additional \$800,000 if CT is awarded the grant).

\*Not contingent on grant.

## Supports

Contracts will be awarded to create five Regional Quality Improvement Centers across the state. Centers will include staff with expertise in:

- licensing process,
- child health and behavioral health,
- early learning and education,
- home-based programs,
- career counseling,
- early childhood education, workforce, and program standards (ELDS, CKC's, QRIS),
- the ConneCT to Quality Rating and Improvement System,
- and national accreditation.

On-line video training modules will be created to complement the in-person support. The Regional Quality Improvement Center's offerings will be aligned with all relevant state standards. All technical assistance activities will be publicized on a central calendar. All technical assistance support will be available to both center- and home-based programs where at least 10% of children served receive Care 4 Kids subsidies<sup>1</sup> as well as other programs for select supports in order to ensure programs, families, and educators have training and support available to increase the quality of programs serving children in target groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Only available to programs that enroll 10% or more of Care 4 Kids subsidized children. Not for programs that are state funded directly (Head Starts, School Readiness, or CDC's) or for programs that enroll fewer than 10% of Care 4 Kids subsidized children.

## **Standards**

The state is currently releasing the newly finalized standards for the workforce, children's learning, and program quality. These standards are integrated and aligned with each other and will serve as a common framework of expectations of performance. They will serve as the foundation for technical assistance, classes, courses, coaching, and support.

**Core Knowledge and Competencies (CKC's):** These standards are designed to outline what the early childhood workforce should be able to do and know. The standards have been designed for educators in early learning settings. If the grant is awarded, standards will be developed for other roles such as coaches, trainers, and consultants.

**Early Learning and Development Standards:** These standards are designed to outline what children should be able to do and know across a wide range of domains including such as skills, health, physical, social, cognitive, emotional.

**Program Standards:** These standards are designed to outline what early learning and development programs should be doing to create an excellent learning environment for children. These standards will be used to determine the levels of quality in the Connect to Quality rating system.

## **Strategies Funded by the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant**

In order to increase the quality of early learning experiences for children in the target populations, the following strategies will be pursued if Connecticut is awarded the grant as well as the associated total funds requested over the four year grant period.

**Strengthen State Governance Systems:** Continue to improve the coordination of programs, involvement of stakeholders, philanthropy, and business to support implementation of bold reform agendas as well as increase staff capacity to carry out grant activities. \$4.3 million

**Launch a Quality Rating System:** Finalize the structure, operations, and processes to open a Quality Rating System able to monitor, rate, and publicize the quality of early learning settings. This will entail external research and study to ensure that the program standards can be used for all settings, are valid and reliable, and meaningfully differentiate between levels of quality. \$1 million

**Provide Supports to Improve Quality:** Establish five Regional Quality Improvement Centers to provide free support, training, consultation, coaching, and classes to educators and staff to help them improve the quality of their early learning setting. \$12 million

**Provide Incentives to Improve Quality:** Make available existing and new incentive funds to programs based on their quality level and the number of children in the target populations served. This will ensure program have the funding needed to achieve and maintain quality. \$12 million in grant funds, \$27 million in existing bond funds to be used for minor capital improvements.

**Inform Families of Program Quality:** Employ strategies to ensure parents are able to understand, access, and use information about program quality to make childcare decisions. This includes developing a plain language website, engaging and training community organizations, providing staff to offer enhanced referrals and case management to families through the 2-1-1 Child Care statewide information call line, launching a statewide Early Childhood Quality public information campaign. \$1.7 million

**Help Families Afford High-Quality Care:** Increase Care 4 Kids reimbursement rates and pilot an elimination of Care 4 Kids family copays for the highest quality programs. \$2 million

**Enhance Workforce, Program, and Learning Standards:** Develop additional guidance to ensure Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) are appropriately used for all children across cultures and developmental needs. Develop additional workforce competencies (CKC's) for additional roles such as trainers, specialists, or coaches. Ensure that the Program Standards (QRIS) are developed for home visiting programs. \$100,000

**Improve the Licensing System:** Increase the frequency of licensing inspections to annual visits. Modify existing licensing process and regulations based on ongoing National Association for Regulatory Administration study and forthcoming recommendations. Study barriers to licensing for unlicensed and license-exempt programs, modify licensing as needed, and engage in a phase-out of most license exemptions. \$50,000 from grant, \$6.5 million from state for additional licensing staff

**Screen Additional Children:** Expand the successful campaign, "Help Me Grow", to an additional 10 communities to increase awareness, interest, and capacity of target communities to ensure behavioral health and developmental screenings are conducted. \$800,000

**Increase the Coordination and Incentives for Workforce Education:** Engage Institutes of Higher Education in a consortium to foster alignment of coursework to all new Standards (CKC's, ELDS, and QRIS) and articulation agreements

between institutions. Existing scholarship money and additional start bonus money will be aligned with new standards. \$2.2 million

**Develop a new Kindergarten Entry Assessment:** Participate in a 7-state early assessment consortium to develop a new Kindergarten Entry Assessment to measure the readiness of children for kindergarten that is aligned to new Early Learning and Development Standards. \$1.5 million

**Build Supports to Sustain Early Learning through Third Grade:** Expand the successful '3 to 3 Initiative' that provides coaching and training to districts serving high numbers of children from the target populations. Launch a cohort-based Executive Leadership Program designed for early childhood directors and elementary principals to build connections beyond preschool for excellent leadership. \$800,000

**Build an Early Childhood Information System:** Use existing \$6 million in funds from bonding to develop a data system that integrates data from all existing systems for children, workforce, and programs related to early childhood. This will ensure unduplicated and integrated data will be available for reports, assessment, and planning. A public web portal to the data will allow parents, educators, and advocates to access child, staff, program, and aggregate level data *as user permissions allow*. \$6 million in existing state funds